

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Director

Here is the piece I promised you on
net estimates. I believe it is all that
you need at this time, but the section on
the Net Evaluation Sub-Committee could be
made more complete and specific with some
further research.

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Director
National Estimates

28 October 1968

(DATE)

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Estimates of Net Capabilities

I. The Doctrine

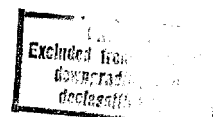
From their beginnings, National Intelligence Estimates on military matters have been prepared in accordance with traditional military doctrine,* which distinguishes between an intelligence estimate and a commander's estimate. The former is produced by the commander's G-2. It includes material on enemy strengths and weaknesses -- numbers of troops and their condition of training and morale; weapons; supplies, etc., etc., plus relevant material on terrain, roads and communications, even political and economic facts bearing on the situation. Then it goes on to a list of enemy "capabilities": i.e., those things that the enemy could do with these forces. The assumption is, at least in theory, that the enemy is unopposed in his actions, and the list is therefore sometimes called one of gross capabilities. The intelligence officer probably selects one or two among these capabilities as being those more likely to be chosen by the enemy commander. With that the formal intelligence estimate ends.

The commander then meditates upon the intelligence estimate. Knowing the strength and capabilities of his own forces he decides what he shall do against the enemy, and presumably forms an idea of how the battle will come out. At least he forms an idea of net capabilities. And he reserves this judgment to himself; it is not the business of his G-2.

In the United States government, the Joint Chiefs of Staff consider estimates of net military capabilities to be exclusively within their province; the Pentagon objects to any intrusion into this field by CIA, USIB, or anyone else. Thus we had, for example,

* The Doctrine is set forth in wearisome detail in the Navy's handbook called Sound Military Decision.

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in the 1950's, numerous NIEs which were called "Soviet Gross Capabilities to Attack the Continental United States," and which to the layman made singularly unrealistic reading, since they took no account of what the US might do to oppose or to prevent such attack.*

II. The Practice

Like most doctrines, the foregoing is seldom very strictly observed in practice -- the G-2 does talk to the G-3, and to the commander, and is usually not without voice when net capabilities are under consideration. Even NIEs have not entirely lacked occasional insights into net capabilities, though these are strictly limited in nature. The following are some of the ways in which this works:

a. We now customarily include a judgment that in a general nuclear war the US and the USSR could each do enormous damage to the other, that each government recognizes this, and that this recognition plays a major role in policy decisions. This is a net estimate. I suspect, however, that it would not have been allowed in NIEs if it had not been officially and publicly proclaimed by the Defense Department, e.g. in the Secretary's briefings of Congressional committees.

b. We sometimes come out with an implied or disguised net estimate, usually preceded by some such phrase as "the Soviet leaders probably believe that," (for example) they could not win a limited military conflict against "major opposing forces" in some overseas area remote from the USSR. By referring to the Soviet leader's beliefs we transform a "commander's estimate" into an intelligence estimate, and we do not explicitly mention US forces.

c. When we have estimated the performance characteristics of particular Soviet weapons systems, we may find that certain

* Note that the prohibition on making intelligence estimates of net capabilities applies only when US forces are on one side of the scale; there is no objection to our doing so with respect to Israeli vs Arab forces, for instance, or those of the USSR vs those of Czechoslovakia. It is worth observing also that the virtual prohibition of "war gaming" in NIEs extends to the political field; we do not estimate the net effectiveness of US policies, except when we are expressly asked to consider the effects of alternate US courses of action in a given situation.

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weaknesses or vulnerabilities (or strengths) lead more or less inevitably to a net estimate. For example: we have in this way judged that the Soviet air defense system is inadequate to deal with low-level attack, and that the Moscow ABM system can be fairly easily saturated. But we never figure out just how many incoming aircraft would get through, or how many ICBMs the Moscow system would neutralize. And even here we observe the conventional verbal niceties: we would never say "US bombers would get through if they flew at low levels."

d. Our various "warning" estimates are in effect net estimates, through they attempt to judge the capabilities of US intelligence vs possible Soviet courses of action, rather than the relative merits of the two military establishments.

Such exceptions to the doctrinal rule are of limited scope. NIEs would never presume to judge who would "win" in a war between the US and the USSR, or what the relative strength of the two military establishments is, or even which is "superior" or "inferior" to the other in this or that aspect of military capabilities. Thus the NIEs leave unanswered some of the questions which are of greatest importance to policy-makers.

XII. The Net Evaluation Sub-Committee

Presumably the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as military advisor to the President, is the man responsible for submitting estimates of net military capabilities. What exactly brought about the establishment of additional machinery for this purpose I do not know, but in late 1952 or early 1953 the National Security Council set up a three-man "Special Evaluation Sub-Committee" to study and report on the probable conduct and consequences of nuclear war between the US and USSR. Chairman of this sub-committee was Lt. Gen. I. H. Edwards, USAF (Ret); General Bull, then on the Board of National Estimates, was a member, and there was an Air Force Major General from the active list. The sub-committee had a staff of ten, including Willard Matthias from ONE. It produced a report dealing with estimated Soviet and known US capabilities, vulnerabilities, strategies of attack, resulting damage, and general outcome. The job was done by early summer of 1953, and was repeated next year with Ray Cline replacing Willard.

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After various interim developments which do not need mention here, the President on 14 February 1955 approved NSC 5511 establishing a permanent Net Evaluation Sub-Committee "to provide integrated evaluations of the net capabilities of the USSR, in the event of general war, to inflict direct injury upon the continental US and key US installations overseas. . .", and stipulating that the first such report should be submitted on or before 1 October 1955. The Sub-Committee this time included the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Chairman), the Director of the Office of Defense Mobilization, the Federal Civil Defense Administrator, the Director of Central Intelligence, the Chairman of the Interdepartmental Intelligence Conference, and the Chairman of the Interdepartmental Committee on Internal Security. Lt. Gen. Harold L. George, USAF (Ret) was selected to be Director of the Staff, and assembled nine military officers, plus Ludwell Montague for Intelligence. (General Bull seems to have kept some sort of liaison interest for another year or two.)

Production of the first report under these auspices seems to have been marked by at least two things worth noting; (a) portentous jurisdictional quarrels among the Joint Staff, the Director of the Net Evaluation Staff, and the Net Evaluation Sub-Committee, and (b) elaborate and expensive war gaming of selected strategies. Members of the Sub-Committee itself played a minor role. Most of them, by the NSC Directive, were not to receive "background material," which included, among other things, the US war plans on which the strategies for the war games were based. Save for CIA's one representative the staff was entirely military, and the whole business was essentially a military exercise, to which CIA contributed the material in NIEs.

By and large this is the way the job continued to be done in following years. Montague was succeeded by Jack Smith; [redacted] and another tour, [redacted] and, finally, [redacted] War gaming "with pencil and paper" was replaced by games with computer.

At the beginning of 1965 the Net Evaluation Sub-Committee was wound up. Possibly this was because its task had been taken over by Systems Analysis. More important seems to be the fact that the President had already concluded, on the basis of the 1955 Evaluation, that the certainty of destruction inherent in a general nuclear war would be unacceptable to both sides. It seemed

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increasingly unprofitable to conduct elaborate war games which annually demonstrated the same thing, with added emphasis and proliferation of detail.

A final comment: the Net Evaluation Sub-Committee actually made net evaluations on only one subject -- the effects on the continental US of an all-out nuclear exchange with the USSR (sometimes extended by the Staff to calculations of damage to the USSR). Nowadays this subject might be described as vital but not important. Save for contemplating the ultimate catastrophe or assessing the nature of the nuclear "umbrella", other "net" estimates have become of more practical significance. For many of them a military war game can be no more than a contributing factor -- it was always easy to show the net military superiority of the US for a conflict in Vietnam, for example; the significant net estimate involved much broader matters.

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